

The Beginning

The history of Kennesaw dates back to the 1830s when the Georgia Legislature authorized the construction of a rail line through Cobb County. Known as the Western and Atlantic Railroad, 20 miles of track was in operation from Terminus (Atlanta) to Cartersville by 1846. Several small towns were founded along the railroad including Vinings, Smyrna, Acworth and Big Shanty.

The abundance of water and high ground adjacent to the railroad led to the construction of worker's shanties near the present day Kennesaw. This area became known as the "big grade to the shanties" and was later shortened to "Big Shanty Grade". The high point of the railroad between the Chattahoochee and Etowah Rivers is the present day crossing in Kennesaw. In the late 1850s, a plot of land was acquired by the Railroad "for the purpose of erecting a Depot and an eating house for the convenience of the traveling public." This eating place became the famous Lacy House and was operated by Mr. and Mrs. George Lacy.

In 1861, Camp McDonald, a training camp for soldiers, was established near Big Shanty. Named for former Governor Charles C. McDonald, a resident of Marietta, Big Shanty was an ideal location for a training camp. There was fresh water available and the railroad furnished a convenient mode of transportation for recruits and supplies. There were no permanent structures, and the men lived in tents. General William Phillips of the Georgia Militia was the commander of the camp. The parade ground was located approximately where Highway 41 crosses Kennesaw Due West Road. On July 31, 1861 a Grand Review of the troops was held in the town and attracted a very large crowd. Such a crowd would not gather again until one hundred years later when The General returned to Kennesaw.

The General Is Stolen

On April 12, 1862, James J. Andrews and a band of Yankee spies boarded the northbound train at Marietta. This mixed train was powered by the locomotive, The General. At Big Shanty, the crew and the passengers left the train to eat breakfast at the Lacy Hotel. While in plain view of the soldiers at Camp McDonald, Andrews and his men stole The General and headed north to destroy the Western and Atlantic Railroad. However, they did not count on the persistence of William A. Fuller, the conductor, who chased the locomotive first on foot before running it down north of Ringgold, Georgia on the locomotive Texas (which ran in reverse). This incident forever placed Big Shanty on the map.

Big Shanty fell to Sherman's troops on June 6, 1864, after which it served as a supply base, hospital and headquarters for the Union forces. The "second battle" of Big Shanty occurred on October 3, 1864 when Confederate General John B. Hood attempted to disrupt Sherman's supply line. During raids in this area, the Confederates briefly recaptured Acworth and Big Shanty and took 350 Union prisoners. On November 9th, as Sherman prepared for his "March to the Sea", he issued orders to destroy the Western and Atlantic Railroad from Big Shanty to the Chattahoochee River. He also ordered that the Lacy Hotel be burned to the ground; this occurred on November 14, 1864.

Post-Civil War

Big Shanty lay in ruins following the War Between the States. By the 1870s, the town was beginning to recover, and there were three retail stores, one blacksmith shop, two house carpenters, two Methodist ministers and one doctor. The Western and Atlantic Railroad was rebuilt and provided an important transportation artery for the town. The First Baptist Church and the Methodist Church were built in 1877. By the 1880s, the area was beginning to recover from the War Between the States, and on September 21, 1887 a petition was presented to the Legislature for incorporation and the City of Kennesaw officially came into being. The Articles of Incorporation stated that: 1) the City of Kennesaw is incorporated; 2) corporate limits of the town shall extend one half mile, north, south, east and west from the Depot of the Western and Atlantic Railroad; 3) there shall be an election of a mayor and four councilmen; 4) the mayor shall have the power to levy and collect taxes; and 5) nothing in this act shall give the town authorities the right to grant license to sell intoxicating liquors.

Slow Growth

During the later part of the 19th century, the city grew slowly. The railroad continued to be the chief source of employment. In 1889, the mayor and council served without pay, and the only city income was from a street tax of fifty cents for every head of household. This was later raised to \$2.50. J.S. Reynolds was elected as first mayor in 1891. During the 1890s, there was a scarlet fever epidemic and later a smallpox scare.

Kennesaw prospered in beginning of the 20th Century. Cotton provided a good source of revenue, and the town served as an important shipping center. The Masonic Hall/dry good store was constructed in 1902, the Kennesaw State Bank building around 1905, and the Western and Atlantic Depot was finished in 1908. The Kennesaw State Bank was chartered around 1910. In 1911, the City began charging the Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis Railway, (former Western and Atlantic), \$100 a year for use of the local spring water. In the 1920s, Kennesaw supported a semi-pro baseball team named the "Kennesaw Smokers". Kennesaw was greatly affected by the depression and boll weevil which virtually destroyed the cotton industry. The City didn't fully recover until the 1980s.

"The Great Locomotive Chase"

The 1950s was a difficult era for the City of Kennesaw. The last cotton gin closed as well as the Kennesaw State Bank. Highway 41 bypassed the city. In 1957, Walt Disney Productions released "The Great Locomotive Chase" starring Fess Parker which sparked interest in the City again. On April 14, 1962, The General retraced its historic run from Kennesaw (Big Shanty) to Chattanooga. The General would once again travel to Kennesaw in 1972 when it was permanently housed in the former Frey Cotton Gin Building following a prolonged court battle with the City of Chattanooga.

The Gun Law

Kennesaw once again was in the news on May 1, 1982, when the city unanimously passed a law requiring "every head of household to maintain a firearm together with ammunition." After passage of the law, the burglary rate in Kennesaw declined and even today, the City has the lowest crime rate in Cobb County.

Prosperity and Rapid Growth

During the 1980s, the economy grew as nearby construction of shopping malls and businesses put the City of Kennesaw into the Metropolitan Atlanta area. In 2000, the City's population was 21,675.

In the spring of 2001, the City opened its own history exhibits located in the historic railroad Depot, and in 2003, the Southern Museum of Civil War and Locomotive History, formerly the Kennesaw Civil War Museum, underwent a massive expansion. In addition to The General and a film about The Great Locomotive Chase, the Museum features two other permanent collections.